

# *Sketch*

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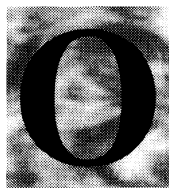
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## Artifacts

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On the first anniversary of my father's death I called my mother. "It's been a year," she said. "The widow support group says I can start making plans now."

"What sort of plans?" I asked.

"First of all," she said, "I'm finally going to throw out most of his things."

"What things?"

"Things that I never knew why he kept around anyway."

I tried to think of what he had left: old 78 records, his locked army trunk, clothes, pictures. There wasn't that much. I already had things I really wanted: a framed greeting card he had given his mother; a picture of him hitchhiking to Algiers.

"I don't know mom," I said, "some of that stuff might be nice to have." But I knew I wouldn't want to go through it myself. Not yet. "What else are you throwing away?"

"Jenny," she said, "I'm throwing away anything that isn't nailed down."

A few days later my sister called from New York.

"Do you know what Mother did?" she asked in a hushed, quickened tone, "She threw away Dad's record player."

"Did you want that?" I asked.

"Dad wanted me to have it," she said. "Once, when we were cleaning out the basement, Mom told him to throw it away, and Dad said to me 'I'd like to see you take that someday. Don't let your mother throw it away.'"

"You should have told Mom."

"She was there when he said it. I just assumed she was saving it for me."

"Elaine, she probably just forgot."

"But last week it was like she called me up just to tell me she threw it away. I think she was even laughing when she told me."

That weekend I drove down from Minneapolis to Des Moines to salvage anything else before Mom got rid of it. Mom told me that she had actually donated the record player to the Goodwill, so I thought there might be a chance I could find it.

Dad's record player was a mahogany console with a heavy felt turntable and a radio. Someone now would call it vintage, but I couldn't see anyone buying it because it hadn't worked for years, and the wood was dull and scratched. It had a deep cigarette burn on top.

I remembered him telling us about how that cigarette burn got there. He bought the record player after he got back from the war, when he was living alone in the Lincoln Hotel in Herndon where he managed a cafe. The night he bought it he had a party. All night he kept telling



everyone, "No drinks or ashtrays on my new record player." But later that night Dad himself put a cigarette in an ashtray there, which then fell out and burned the line in the wood.

"Damned if I didn't do it myself!" he told us, chuckling, running his finger along the dark, flaking scar.

When I got to Des Moines I asked my mother if she had called the Goodwill about the record player.

"Why yes," she said. "I did."

"And what did they say?"

"Let's see," she said, "Oh, yes. The man said there was no telling where it would be. They rotate things from store to store all over central Iowa. It may even turn up back here. But it may be sold. They don't really keep track, I guess."

"I told Elaine I'd look for it," I said. "Will you come with me?"

"I suppose so. Your sister's furious about this, isn't she?"

We went from one town to another, stopping at the Goodwills that were on the same circuit as the one in Des Moines. I think Mom enjoyed lingering over some of the junk — dusty glassware, warped pans, and clothes which were faded or yellowed.

"Look," she said at the Goodwill in Carrol, "A Dutton teapot for only three dollars."

"It's cracked," I said, but I thought about buying it because looking at the cracked dishes and chipped glasses I wished I could buy everything, return the discarded goods to their owners, put everything back where it belonged.

In Herndon we talked to a man who said yes, he thought he had had the record player. He sold it to a man who came here from out east, someone who refinishes old stereo consoles, rewires them and rebuilds the insides with CD players.

"Well that's that," my mother said.

Herndon is a small farming community that could hardly ever support a restaurant. I know this because I've heard about the one my father ran there in the late forties. After struggling for a few years he abandoned it, moved to Des Moines where he re-met my mother. A couple years later they were married.

Though three quarters of the store fronts in the town square are now empty, in a little house near the square there is a thriving tea room called the Calico Kitchen. It is run by two farmer's wives who opened it after their husbands lost their farms. Though few people from Herndon go there, it is always crowded with people from Des Moines who come for homey pot-pies, casseroles, or kielbasa and to get a glimpse of the country's life that's vanishing around them.

Mom wanted to stop at the tea room on our way back to Des Moines. We had to wait ten minutes for a table. "Imagine that," she said, "and your father could hardly keep his place going."

Mom talked excitedly as we ate apple crisp with fresh cream.

"This is going to be a good year for me," she said.

"I hope so, Mom."

"Last year was awful."

"I know it was."

"No, it was even worse that you'd think. I couldn't stand that house, living there, alone, with all his things, waiting for him to come back and use them. It felt kind of good to throw all that stuff away."

"You know," she said, "I've always thought that you should never save anything you wouldn't want the whole world to see. And you should never write anything down that you wouldn't want your whole family to read. Your father, he



saved a lot of things in that old army trunk of his that he would never have wanted you girls to see."

"Like?" I asked.

"Pictures of he and his buddies drunk at Johnnie's Vet's Club. Filthy old letters from his army buddies."

"Did you read any of them?"

"I read one or two, but they were all the same. All about girls. You know."

No, I didn't know.

Many of my friends can remember their parents' 30th birthdays. My parents lives before me were vast. They were 38 when they married, 40 when I was born.

If I pieced it together the best I could do was this: They both grew up in Greene County, Mom on a farm, Dad in town. At 20 Mom moved to the big city, Des Moines, where she managed the bus depot. Dad went into the army. Years passed, WWII; and somewhere between 1945 and 1950 on a trip to California a gypsy fortune teller told Mom she would marry someone she had known all her life. "Hurley Martin, the bum!" my mother thought, as he was the only bachelor left from Herndon. My father was married at the time. Sometime during the years he owned the restaurant he married a young woman named Margaret Mae who died of an aneurism a year after they were married. The restaurant failed; my father moved to Des Moines.

"You can ask me anything you want about her," my father had said when he thought we were old enough.

"What did she look like," I had asked. He closed his eyes for a moment and then said, "You know, I can't even remember."

I believed him and I never thought much about her until we buried my father next to her in the family plot, where there's a place for my mother on his other side. I remember that day

feeling oddly comfortable that someone was lying next to Dad, and that after all these years alone Margaret Mae had someone lying next to her.

That day in Herndon my mother told me what else she had thrown out: clothes, newspaper clippings, pens, business cards, menus from his restaurant, postcards of motels and restaurants from his days as a salesman.

"He was such a pack-rat," she said.

"Did you save any pictures — like of his family?"

"Oh, of course," she said, "Now those are things I can understand you girls wanting."

"Did he have any pictures of Margaret Mae?"

"No," she said. "She was so young. She was 20 when they married. Your father was 30."

"Did you know her?"

"I knew of her. I was living in Des Moines when they were married."

She paused for a while, looking out the window behind me. Then she looked straight at me. "You know," she said, "they say she adored your father. They say no one was ever as crazy about a man as she was about him." She smiled like she was proud. Then she started talking cheerfully about that plans she would make. She wanted to do some travelling. Perhaps she would move into an apartment. She took out her compact mirror and carefully applied some lipstick — a bright shade that I had never seen on her before.

I was sorry that we hadn't found the record player. I thought about how the gruff, no-necked men from the Goodwill had probably whisked it away like garbage while my other excitedly clasped her hands together, thanking them. I could picture some man in Brooklyn working



on it, sanding down the finish, erasing the cigarette burn.

But what I could picture most was my father, slender, 29, mustached; he and his buddies dancing with the young women in his room in the Lincoln Hotel where the threadbare carpets are rolled up, bottles of beer tipped over, Harry James records cracking and popping under the heavy needle. Later, after all the other guests are gone a young shy woman looks for her hat, wondering if she should stay or go home, while my father's cigarette burns into the wood.

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## *Equality of Pain*

**Raul Flores Jr.**

Sometimes I think that person  
was born with a devilish grin;  
You might say 'so what,'  
But in the end  
it matters.

To the ground falls a balloon  
that's tied to a  
five year old man  
and it breaks his heart  
just like all his friends,  
But we all know...  
Things change.

Like the damn wind  
Go the hours.

So you say,  
'so,'  
But it's true that even this day will end  
And it matters  
It really matters.

